

In good hands? Foresight and strategic thinking capabilities of regional university leaders

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Regional universities are systemically critical to nation building and in particular regional wellbeing. Their impact is broad, encompassing the full diversity of sustainability indicators across ecological, social and economic dimensions. Regional universities significantly contribute to regional resilience, adaptability and economic growth. Approximately 80% of Australia's exports are generated in regional areas. The relative health of regions is broadly acknowledged as fundamental to Australia's future and international standing. This study is concerned with the role of senior university leadership in enabling regional universities to continue to have a meaningful presence in regional systems and optimise their impact in times that are undergoing significant flux and typified as 'regional communities under threat'. Leadership of regional universities, by implication, play a critical role in achieving regional wellbeing, productivity and resilience through the relative success or not, of their universities. The study builds on previous studies that confirm the importance of foresight competence and strategic thinking in leadership and organisational performance. The study adopts the notion that leadership is the primary enabler of university strategic direction and that these leadership capabilities are antecedents to university strategic decision making, policy formulation, primary pedagogical assumptions and mission. It adopts a validated and reliable model to investigate the related cognitive profiles of senior university leaders. This is the first empirical study that investigates the foresight competence and strategic thinking of strategy-level leaders of regional universities. The study adopts a survey methodology. The results confirm the importance of foresight and strategic thinking capabilities in senior university leadership. They also illustrate the averaged foresight and strategic thinking profiles of leaders in Queensland regional universities and that these may be an indication of leadership in regional universities more generally. The study concludes by illustrating ways in which the 'flatlands' of higher education can be overcome by developing futures-orientated core competence in regional universities.